

Not a Hoax, Not a Myth: Lawyer Happiness Is Possible



The prevalence of depression and stress within the legal profession often creates an atmosphere where the concept of lawyer happiness appears elusive, almost like a myth. Legal work, by its very nature, is demanding and frequently entails extensive hours of hard work. The stress emanates from the intense focus on winning cases, coupled with the awareness that the outcomes have the potential to profoundly impact lives. This burden can significantly weigh on a lawyer's mind, contributing to an environment where personal happiness seems overshadowed by professional pressures.

However, it's crucial to recognize that, despite the inherent challenges, attaining personal happiness as a lawyer is not an unattainable goal. Happiness is not an exclusive realm reserved for other professions, and it is indeed possible for legal professionals to experience fulfillment both personally and professionally. This requires adopting the right mindset, leveraging appropriate tools, and demonstrating a willingness to embrace change when necessary.

Developing a positive mindset involves cultivating resilience and finding meaning in the legal work undertaken. By recognizing the value of one's contributions, lawyers can shift their focus from the inherent stressors to the meaningful impact they have on individuals and society. Additionally, adopting tools such as effective time management, stress-reduction techniques, and self-care practices can play a pivotal role in mitigating the negative effects of the demanding legal environment.

Furthermore, a crucial aspect of achieving happiness in the legal profession is the willingness to adapt and change when needed. This might involve reassessing priorities, setting boundaries, and seeking support when facing overwhelming challenges. Embracing a proactive approach to mental well-being and seeking help when necessary can contribute significantly to creating a more balanced and fulfilling professional life.

In essence, while the legal profession may be inherently stressful, lawyers have the capacity to carve out spaces of happiness for themselves. By fostering the right mindset, utilizing appropriate tools, and demonstrating a readiness to adapt, legal professionals can not only navigate the challenges of their profession but also cultivate a sense of satisfaction and well-being in their personal and career journeys.

Are lawyers happy?

According to ABA, 20% of lawyers have alcohol use issues—twice the national rate of the general population. Also,

lawyers suffer from depression and suicide rates that are higher than the general public's. To combat this issue, the legal industry needs to focus on legal wellness (or lawyer well-being).

Can lawyers be happy?

The answer is yes—with clearly drawn boundaries. Lawyers have above-average job satisfaction, which increases for lawyers with a longer tenure. This suggests that law school graduates tend to be less satisfied while they're still acclimating to the industry.

Drawing the boundaries between work life and personal life is difficult for lawyers when they're fresh out of law school. Unfortunately, work-life balance is not something lawyers can learn in the classroom. As new lawyers navigate the workplace and learn how to sustainably grow their careers without burning themselves out too quickly, they are likely to become happier over time.

What contributes to lawyer happiness?

Growing a support system, getting better at managing work-life balance, and understanding how client matters positively impact people's lives—these are some changes that happen in a lawyer's career that contribute to higher job satisfaction and increased happiness.

It's also worthwhile to note that salary is not a factor of lawyer happiness according to multiple studies. While a new lawyer's salary will grow as their career progresses, the salary they command does not contribute to their happiness—to a certain point. After a lawyer obtains a salary of above \$75,000, income stops being a factor in lawyer happiness. Instead, lawyers start comparing their salaries to their peers'.

How to be a happy lawyer—and stay that way

While the data in the above section shows happier days are coming for new lawyers, you can still take steps now to alleviate stress, find fulfillment in your career, and be happier.

Keep in mind that this list isn't exhaustive. Rather, come back to this list when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, or when you feel like you need to make a change.

Determine what makes you happy

It's difficult to work towards being happier until you understand your drivers of happiness are.

Consider what your values and goals are, and if and how your career aligns with them. You are not just your job. Focus on hobbies and personal interests that make you happy outside of work.

Don't just find time—make time in your life to socialize and be around friends, family, and colleagues who contribute to your happiness.

Make smaller, incremental changes

Small annoyances can build up and contribute to underlying stress. For example, the chair you have might be causing back pains that are further aggravated by other disruptors.

Opening a window in your office or having plants may seem insignificant at first. But small changes can make a big difference in your mood.

Explore part-time work, taking on different types of cases, hiring paralegals or other support staff to reduce routine, non-billable tasks.

Find ways to streamline the tedious parts of your job, like invoicing, so you're spending more time on the parts that make you feel excited and fulfilled.

Be open to larger changes

If your current role or career path isn't aligned to your values, or if it isn't giving you the time to do the things that make you happy, it might be time for a change.

Ask yourself:

Is this temporary (stress from a particular client or matter)?

Is this current situation inherent at your firm, or part of a larger industry problem? If so, is there something you can do to lead change?

Have you brought up your stressors to management and gotten brushed off?

If your answer to all these questions is yes, you may want to consider making a career change.

Pros and cons of different types of firms

Depending on where you currently work, use this pros and cons list as a starting point:

Options	Pros	Cons
New, similar-sized firm	Establish boundaries from the start, including hours and work from home options	Takes time to ramp up and depending on how you answered the questions, the problems from your old firm might re-appear
Smaller firm	More control over the types of cases, and how many, you are managing at any given time	Fewer resources, mentorship opportunities, and has the potential for overwork
Larger firm	More shared resources and colleagues you can learn from and get help when needed, likely more structured and well-established	Less autonomy and upward mobility, may not be able to control the types of cases you handle
Your own practice	Be your own boss, set your own hours, work on matters that you work on	Attracting clients and becoming established can be difficult, need to understand how to run the business side of a law firm in addition to practicing law
New practice area/Niche	This type of work may align with your values better and	The learning curve can be

law firm	give you more interesting cases to work on	high and nuances will be difficult to learn at first
----------	--	--

Consider alternative careers

Also depending on your answers to the above questions, you could consider an alternative career in legal, or even outside of traditional law firms. Many companies of different sizes and industries rely on expert legal counsel to run their business. Law firms are no longer the only place lawyers can work. Alternative careers include:

In-house/ corporate counsel for healthcare/ manufacturing/ technology/ etc. companies

Non-profits

Legal technology

Arbitration/ mediation

Teaching

Legal sales representative (somebody who sells legal services to clients)

85% of lawyers will change jobs at least once throughout their careers. While most move into other jobs within the legal industry, a significant portion of lawyers eventually transition into non-legal related professions. In this same study, for law school graduates who have graduated for 15 to 20 years, more than 20% had shifted out of practicing law completely.

The idea of working for a single company your entire career is no longer the norm: The median employee tenure for lawyers is 5.8 years. Changing careers when you feel trapped and burned out can benefit your mental health and help set you up for success in the long run.

Finding happiness as a lawyer

Lawyers with a higher level of happiness tend to be in legal positions where they have high levels of responsibility, receive recognition for their work, have good relationships with colleagues, and can dictate how much work they take on.

Lawyer happiness is each individual's responsibility. Identify what's important to you and changes you can make—big or small—to seize your own happiness.